

# When Traffic Congestion Is Both a Great Thing and a Terrible Thing

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Daily commuters think of traffic congestion as unequivocally awful, but the people who run brick-and-mortar businesses tend to be torn. On one hand, they too hate when bad traffic prevents workers and customers from coming and going as quickly as they please. On the other, business owners recognize that heavy traffic indicates an active spot and encourages vital interactions — in short, that it's a [sign of success](#).

Transport researcher Matthias Sweet of McMaster University has attempted to measure both the good and the bad of metro area traffic. In the *Journal of Transport Geography*, Sweet reports that businesses may be more likely to leave urban areas with lots of *regional* congestion but prefer to stay in cities with lots of *local* congestion. The yin and the yang of traffic continues.

Sweet's words, our emphasis:

**In sum, while regional congestion appears to be a drag, local congestion appears to function as an amenity** — implying that there is truth in the competing notions among engineers and economists of congestion as a diseconomy and among urban designers of congestion as an amenity.

Sweet's [previous work](#) also demonstrates the push and pull traffic has on a city's productivity. In a study of 88 congested metros from last fall, he reported that congestion initially encourages economic growth but then becomes a drag once it reaches a certain threshold — roughly 4.5 minutes per trip. Past that point, traffic stops recruiting people to an area and starts grating on quality of life for workers.

The new work looks specifically at business in the Philadelphia metro area. Sweet tracked the movements of more than 30,000 Philadelphia businesses in five industries (finance, health care, manufacturing, real estate, and wholesale trade) from 2003 to 2007 and likewise examined local and regional traffic levels during the same period. The congestion analysis compared job accessibility during free-flowing road conditions to those during peak afternoon rush-hour.

The question Sweet wanted to ask was simple (do firms flee congested areas?). The answer he found wasn't.

Sweet found that Philadelphia firms were more likely to relocate away from the metro area as regional congestion increased, but wanted to stay when there was lots of local congestion. Strangely, he found that fleeing firms (with the exception of those in the real estate industry) sought out a new site with lots of regional congestion but not one with a great deal of local traffic — a complete contrast in preference to the decision about leaving.

In aggregate, though, Sweet concluded that regional congestion was a drag while local congestion was desirable. Firms flee regional congestion more than they flock to it. They also stick to local congestion more than they shy away from it.

So in addition to the amount of metro area traffic, the location of it matters, too. While the finding focused on Philadelphia, Sweet tells *Cities* "it is unlikely to be unique" because it's consistent with a nuanced perspective on traffic and firm location. And it makes sense that regional congestion would hurt a business by increasing commute times while local congestion would help it by increasing personal and corporate interaction (or, in the parlance of scholars, [agglomeration](#)).

We all want to work in a buzzing activity center. We just don't always love getting there.

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